

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
Prof. Pramod K Nayar
Department of English
University of Hyderabad

Backgrounds to the English Romantics, 1798-1832 – Empire II

In this lesson, we will continue our exploration of the contexts for the English Romantics. When we concluded the previous lesson, I mentioned that we need to see the English Romantics as being transnational in their interests, exchanges, connections and influences. We extend that into this lesson as well.

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The Empire and the colony were responsible for the transnational nature of the English Romantics, as contemporary critics have been arguing. One of the most significant socio-cultural contexts that informed the Romantics and directly connected them to their transnational linkages was the question of slavery. There were other dimensions as well: the concern with Native Americans in Robert Southey, William Wordsworth and others, as well as the interest in commodities and products from other parts of the world.

But the focus for now will be on slavery. The 1780-1830 debates around slavery with abolitionist rhetoric focused on the trauma of the enslaved African, the exploitative nature of colonial labour and as such, indicated the widespread interest in the racial and cultural Other.

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Many writers did see the plantations in the colonies as spaces where there would be “the benevolent Englishman”. The benevolent Englishman is a stereotype of this particular period. Other texts mapped the conquest and settlement of the Caribbean. James Grainger’s long poem, “The Sugar-Cane”, 1764, is one such. The poem was a paean to the crop but also glorified slavery by demonstrating how “with placid looks” and “willing ardour” the slaves went to work in the Englishmen’s plantations.

In short, the plantation and slavery became symbols of England's national culture itself. We will play some attention to an extraordinary text, which falls within the ambit of the Romantic period, Maria Edgeworth's short story, "The Grateful Negro", published in 1804. In her story, the slaves of Mr. Edwards have little gardens attached to their huts and they get one day a week to cultivate them.

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Crops and produce in such representations become integral to the image of the laboring Englishman: where landowners are heroes. In both cases, English culture manifests in not simply cultivation of crops or commodities but in the commanding of slave's loyalty and acts of benevolence in the course of the cultivation. The loyalty of the slaves was the focus of Edgeworth's story which implied that slavery was tolerable, provided the Englishman was benevolent.

She represents a labouring system in which the slaves are happy to work for the Englishmen. They are loyal, harmless, committed and loving towards the Englishmen. This image of the benevolent Englishman is central to the reinvention of slavery itself. So, while there were critics, of course, who condemned slavery, there was also the trope of the benevolent Englishmen that posited that not all slave owners were cruel and that several of the Englishmen were in fact good masters.

Loyalty of the slaves and the masters' acts of benevolence in the course of the cultivation process are documented in several stories such as Edgeworth's. We will now look at an excerpt from Edgeworth's story.

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The protagonist is a man called Caesar, a slave of Mr. Edwards, the English owner.

Caesar had no knife. "Here is mine for you", said Mr. Edwards. "It is very sharp", added he, smiling, "but I am not one of those masters who are afraid to trust their negroes with sharp knives." These words were spoken with perfect simplicity: Mr. Edwards had no suspicion, at this time, of what was passing in the Negro's mind. Caesar received the knife without uttering a syllable; but no sooner was Mr. Edwards out of sight that he knelt

down, and, in a transport of gratitude, swore that he would stab himself to the heart sooner than betray his master!

She makes a key point here. The Englishman has a very trusting nature.

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Mr. Edwards has entrusted the knife to the black slave, showing implicit trust in the black man. The slave is so overwhelmed by this gesture and so overcome with gratitude at this trust that he swears that he will kill himself rather than turn the knife against his white master. Here is a continuation of Edgeworth's description of Caesar:

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The principle of gratitude conquered every other sensation. The mind of Caesar was not insensible to the charms of freedom: he knew the Negro conspirators had so taken their measures that there was the greatest probability of their success. His heart beat high at the idea of recovering his liberty.

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Caesar is torn between a group of conspirators who want to overthrow their white masters and acquire freedom on the one hand, and his sense of loyalty towards his master on the other. Edgeworth suggests that Caesar is a good slave produced by a good master. So, if we link this to the abolitionist rhetoric of the time we see the various angles through which slavery was explored.

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Here is another one example. This is an excerpt from William Cowper's poem, "Charity".

Bid suffer it a while, and kiss the rod,
Wait for the dawning of a brighter day,
And snap the chain the moment when you may.
Nature imprints upon whate'er we see,
That has a heart and life in it, Be free!
The beasts are charter'd—neither age nor force
Can quell the love of freedom in a horse:
He breaks the cord that held him at the rack;
And, conscious of an unencumber'd back,
Snuffs up the morning air, forgets the rein;
Loose fly his forelock and his ample mane;
Responsive to the distant neigh, he neighs;
Nor stops, till, overleaping all delays,
He finds the pasture where his fellows graze.

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We need to look at this particular text in some detail. For Cowper, the horse which is straining at the reins becomes a symbol of an urge for freedom. The animalizing of the slave in the analogy, however, establishes an easy equivalence between the enslaved human being, on the one hand and the animal on the other. Both the animal and the black slave can only fight the restrictions placed upon them through raw physical power.

This also recalls the far older stereotyping of the black man as an animal. So, the savagery implicit in the Cowper rhetoric is actually part of the analogy and metaphor of an entire discourse of colonialism and slavery in its account of the non-Europeans.

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The “charter’d” beasts represent regulations and bondages placed upon the slave. The horse’s bit and reins are symbols of its restriction and lack of freedom. The rhetoric then equates the black human being with the animal. In other words, the black man is reduced to his basic corporeal body alone. This is a stereotype.

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In the anti-slavery poetry of the 1760-1840 period, the slave is not the despised, exotic Other. There is something else going on. Let us take a look at a radical poet: William Blake in “The Little Black Boy”.

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black as if bereav’d of light.

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Blake, as per his usual system, engages in a constant play between black and white, and light and darkness. Such a playfulness is sustained through Blake’s entire corpus. But look at what the boy is saying: “My mother bore me in the southern wild”. “The wild” is a trope and a metaphor that applies as much to the setting as to the person.

So, Blake contrasts the black boy and his collateral, the “dark continent”, the nickname for Africa during this period, with his white soul.

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Let us look at excerpts from Hannah More’s famous text published in 1788, “Slavery: A Poem”.

they have heads to think, and hearts to feel,
And souls to act, with firm, tho' erring zeal;
For they have keen affections, kind desires,

Love strong as death, and active patriot fires; 70
All the rude energy, the fervid flame,
Of high-soul'd passion, and ingenuous shame:
Strong, but luxuriant virtues boldly shoot
From the wild vigour of a savage root.

...In all the love of HOME and FREEDOM reign

...Tho' dark and savage, ignorant and blind,
They claim the common privilege of kind;

...There needs no logic sure to make us feel.
The nerve, howe'er untutor'd, can sustain
A sharp, unutterable sense of pain

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In her poem, More begins by proposing that the blacks have the power of rationality, and then smoothly elides this feature for their characteristic passion and emotions. Note what she is saying: “they have heads to think, and hearts to feel”. Then she says, they may act but through “erring zeal”. She suggests that they are not very competent in using their rationality. Their energies are cruder and rawer.

These are the virtues of the slave: keen affections, kind desires, love strong as death, and active patriot fires. The slave is not a rational creature but an emotional one. He does not have intellect but has sentiment. This then is a stereotype, a very clear binary between a rational white man and a sentimental black man. The white man is both strong physically but also strong mentally as in intellectually and rationally. The black, on the other hand, is physically strong. His mental faculties are weak but his emotions run high.

We saw similar representational techniques in Edgeworth's description of Caesar who was overcome with emotion, overwhelmed with gratitude and so on and so forth. More calls for a compassionate treatment of these poor souls. What is it we learn from these examples? From Hannah More, William Cowper and Blake, of course?

What we discover is that with the expansion of imperial dominion, with the expansion of geographical territory, English authors, reading public and statesmen, all, begin to encounter

people of different cultures and races. They tried to engage with this difference even as these people were sought to be conquered. The resulting stereotypes are, of course, negative stereotypes.

But it is important for us to note that these Others became a subject of poetry. Hence, we must again emphasize that Romantic poetry is not only about the English countryside or its old ruins. English poetry and fiction of this period was equally concerned about racial and cultural difference. The empire fueled larger debates on slavery but also on humanitarian imperialism.

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Let us now take a look at the stereotype of the Noble Savage which dates back to the 17th century. The Other in this case is exoticized through a binary between a civilized but unhappy Christian and the pagan and happy Indian. That is, though Christian, the Englishman is unhappy and though pagan, the Native American or Indian is happy.

The innocence of the civil savage was of course a marker of a pre-modern primitive life and was therefore considered pure and prelapsarian. In the age of Wordsworth, particularly, “innocence”, particularly of children, was of considerable cultural currency. We find often a comparison between the innocent child and the innocent East Indian. Here is Wordsworth’s description from the Book I of *The Prelude*.

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Oh, many a time have I, a five years’ child,
In a small mill-race severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer’s day;
Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again
Alternate, all a summer’s day, or scoured
The sandy fields, leaping through flowery groves
Of yellow ragwort; or, when rock and hill,
The woods, and distant Skiddaw’s lofty height,
Were bronzed with deepest radiance, stood alone
Beneath the sky, as if I had been born

On Indian plains, and from my mother's hut
Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport
A naked savage, in the thunder shower.

Note the analogy between the carefree, playful, innocent and happy child and an Indian. Wordsworth says it was “as if I had been born On Indian plains, and from my mother's hut Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport”. The “innocence” of the child, its harmlessness and its joy of being unfettered and unrestricted is comparable to that of the Indian.

You might remember Alexander Pope who refers to “the untutored mind” of the non-European. The non-European Other, in this stereotype, is seen as carefree, not encumbered with learning, wisdom or rationality, instead he enjoys an unrestrained freedom.

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You will see this stereotype in several other Wordsworth poems such as “Her Eyes Are Wild”. You will see it in Felicia Hemans’ “The Indian City” and Robert Southey’s “The Dirge of the American Widow” where the Native American woman is a picture of grief, inadequacy, and even revenge. In both Hemans’ and Southey’s texts, the women embark on a saga of bloody revenge. The savage here is not simply a primitive creature. In fact, the moral values and sentimentality of the savage are almost on par with the English. Hence, a Noble Savage.

What key points have we noted in this lesson? We need to understand that there are two clear political and social agendas that emerge out of the imperial moment in English Romantic writing. One is the abolitionist debate about slavery. We have seen this in texts by Maria Edgeworth, William Cowper, William Blake which posit the black, the African-American and the African in certain ways.

We have seen the debate around slavery: whether slavery should be abolished or not, whether a benevolent Englishman can inculcate a spirit of gratitude in the African or not. The second component is what we have just seen – the idea of the Noble Savage. Now, in both stereotypes, that of the slave and the Noble Savage, the black and the Indian, the English poet or novelist engages with racial and cultural difference.

These questions were central to the imagining of England's responsibility as well. Critics have argued that during this period, the 1790s to 1830s, one sees the rise of humanitarian imperialism where it becomes England's responsibility to be a moral imperialist and take care of the people over whom it establishes dominion. Keep this in mind: Central to our understanding of the extended context for the English Romantics, 1798 to 1832, is its transnational engagements.

Further/ Recommended Readings

Leask, Nigel. *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire*. Cambridge UP, 1992.

Makdisi, Saree. *Making England Western: Orientalism, Race, and Imperial Culture*. U of Chicago P, 2013.

Makdisi, Saree. *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity*. Cambridge UP, 1998.

Richardson, Alan and Sonia Hofkosh, editors. *Romanticism, Race and Imperial Culture*. Indiana UP, 1996.

Suleri, Sara. *The Rhetoric of English India*. U of Chicago P, 1992.